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TAGS: PREL PHUM KGOV RS GG

SUBJECT: DAS BRYZA VISIT WITH DEFENSE MINISTER KEZERASHVILI

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 9, Georgian Defense Minister Kezerashvili and First Deputy Defense Minister Kutelia told DAS Bryza that they were very concerned by the build-up of Russian forces in Abkhazia, claiming that at least 600 of the forces that purported to be peacekeepers are actually paratroopers deployed outside the conflict zone. They foresaw that the Abkhaz situation will soon calm, and the Russians will bring in businessmen and official representatives to Abkhazia to "normalize relations." Kezerashvili assessed that in the absence of political consequences for the latest Russian actions, the current situation will soon become the status quo from which Medvedev will operate. He believed it was vitally important to return to the status quo ante. Bryza explained his effort to de-escalate tensions by working with the Georgians and the Abkhaz on a new forum to negotiate a settlement. He cautioned that should Georgia go to war, it would go alone and would lose to Russia's stronger force. He said that Georgia would also completely lose politically and economically in such a situation. End Summary.

Doubtful of MAP in December

¶2. (C) Kutelia told Bryza that CDU MPs from within German Chancellor Merkel's inner circle had told them informally that Georgia will not be offered MAP in December, citing the issue as "too politically sensitive." Kezerashvili said that Europe was reluctant to side with Georgia against Russia, even in the face of the recent investigation into the downing of a Georgian UAV by Russian aircraft on April 21. Kezerashvili said that if international support disappears for Georgia, it will be harder for the GOG to make the right decisions in response to Russian provocations.

Build-Up in Gudauta

¶3. (C) Kezerashvili found worrisome the build-up of troops at Gudauta which he stressed were not only peacekeepers but also 600 paratroopers and 600 pensioners (Note: Although Kezerashvili said retirees, it is likely he was referring to mercenaries with previous military service, who are now civilians under contract. End Note.) He found particularly troubling the fact that no one is able to verify the exact number of troops there. Kutelia said that Georgian authorities had inquired about Open Skies flying over Gudauta in an attempt to clarify troop levels, but it was deemed too dangerous. Kezerashvili emphasized that the international community cannot expect Georgia to wait forever to respond to the troop build-up situation. As he put it, "I am not a hawk but each day we are losing on the ground there, and if finally there will be 10,000 troops, artillery, anti-air defense weapons and tanks, Abkhazia will be lost forever." He worried that one day Georgians would look back at this time and assess that they had missed their chance to stop

Russian annexation. Although he was not pushing for war, Kezerashvili would rather fight and lose than not fight at all. He warned that Georgia's redlines included killing of Georgians living in the Gali district of Abkhazia, an Abkhaz and/or Russian military action to take the Kodori valley, and a significant further Russian troop increase in Abkhazia. He told Bryza that without Western political support against Russia, it was hard for him and other moderates to put the war option to rest. Bryza said bluntly that if Georgia were to go to war, it would go alone and it would lose not only militarily but also politically--by losing U.S. and European support, including for MAP--as well as economically.

Kezerashvili acknowledged Georgian offensive military actions would squash any hopes for MAP, as well as ruin the Georgian economy.

Abkhaz Motives

¶4. (C) Kezerashvili was doubtful that Abkhazia truly wants independence. He opined that perhaps the "old warriors" wanted independence, but the current de facto ruling elite looks to Moscow for direction--and that the "boots on the ground" of Russian troops underscores this. Kutelia was doubtful that establishing direct dialogue with de facto authorities would build political capital which could be used against the Russians. As he put it, whenever they had tried to establish informal links with the de facto regime, meetings were canceled at the last minute due to KGB intimidation of Abkhaz or there were assassination attempts if meetings were planned in a third neutral country, like Turkey. Kutelia said that all the Abkhaz have their families safely tucked away in Russia, which further strengthens the

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Abkhaz-Russia bond.

Return to the Status Quo Ante

¶5. (C) Bryza said that he is trying to establish a new forum with political teeth which would overshadow the Friends format and become the primary locus of direct Abkhaz-Georgian negotiations. In this way, the U.S. could help Georgia move toward a political settlement. Bryza said he supported President Saakashvili's proposal to the Abkhaz which would permit IDP returns and create an economic zone. Bryza's idea is to work with the Black Sea Trust and members of the international community such the EU, UN, OSCE, Ukraine, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and the current members of the Friends to implement such a plan. Such a forum will yield positive results, build political capital with the Abkhaz from the Georgian side, which could then be used to block Russian political moves. This new forum would emerge organically alongside the Group of Friends, at first to support economic and social links between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, and then evolving into a forum to support direct Abkhaz-Georgian talks.

¶6. (C) Both Kezerashvili and Kutelia attributed Putin's recent actions not only as punishment for Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership, but also to a strong demand within Russian domestic politics to respond to Kosovo independence. Kutelia's big concern was that if the international community does not react demonstrably to Russian's latest provocative steps--Putin's announcement of withdrawing from the CIS economic and military sanctions, the Kremlin's April 16 instructions to establish semi-official relations with the separatist authorities, building up troops in Abkhazia--that soon the situation will morph into a new status quo from which all future negotiations would begin. They asked the U.S. to help return the situation to the status quo ante.

¶7. (U) DAS Bryza has cleared this cable.

TEFFT